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# NEWS RELEASE

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## **Chief Justice Urges New Judgeships, Upgraded Courthouses in California**

### ***Ensuring Access to Justice for Californians***

Sacramento—In his 11th annual State of the Judiciary address to the Legislature, Chief Justice Ronald M. George today urged all three branches of government to continue to work together to create urgently needed new judicial positions in California and to upgrade the state's often unsafe courthouses.

The address was delivered before a joint session of the California Legislature in the Assembly Chambers of the state Capitol Building.

“Our state's vast growth in population and the problems that accompany it are outstripping the ability of the courts to dispense justice,” Chief Justice George told lawmakers.

“First, we cannot keep up without a long overdue increase in the number of judicial positions,” he added. “Second, we cannot provide necessary service to the public if our state's courthouse facilities are not included in your plans to revitalize California's aging and unsafe infrastructure.”

When the Chief Justice took office almost 10 years ago, he began a process of reforming the state court system in partnership with scores of legislators and three governors. That process has resulted in three key structural changes: a state-funded court system, unification of the trial courts, and state ownership of California's courthouses.

Despite substantial improvements in the judicial branch over the past decade, the Chief Justice warned that more needs to be done.

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## **NEED FOR NEW JUDGESHIPS**

A bill pending in the state Legislature, Senate Bill 56 (Dunn), would create 150 new judgeships and permit the conversion of some commissioner positions to new judgeships, the Chief Justice reported.

A recent study by the National Center for State Courts showed that the caseload of California courts warrants the addition of 355 new judicial positions, the Chief Justice explained. However, California is focusing only on the most urgently needed 150 positions, asking that 50 new judgeships be added in each of the next three fiscal years.

Since 1988, California's population has increased by 30 percent. During that period, only 41 new judgeships have been added to the trial courts, an increase of less than 3 percent.

In Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, the need is most severe. Since 1980, those counties have seen population increases of 150 and 100 percent, respectively. In Riverside County, civil trials have been halted twice recently due to the insufficient number of judges and the heavy influx of new criminal cases, which take priority under state law.

"Courts cannot simply hang a sign announcing: 'Full. No more filings accepted.'" the Chief Justice declared.

"We cannot tell prosecutors not to file criminal charges, or inform injured parties that there is no forum in which they can vindicate their rights," he continued. "And society cannot function as it should if families are left in suspense about their future, and businesses remain uncertain about their obligations and their rights, and the courts are not available to help people resolve their disputes in a peaceful manner."

## **NEW AND UPGRADED COURTHOUSES**

"Providing safe and secure facilities in which judicial proceedings take place is a matter of great urgency for all of us," the Chief Justice noted. "Courthouses serve as cornerstones of our society and are where individuals have the most direct contact with government."

"Current conditions in more than 90 percent of our court facilities jeopardize public and staff safety every day," he said. Two-thirds of present courthouse space is seismically deficient, and other facilities are believed to contain toxic mold.

Sixty-eight percent of courthouses do not meet basic fire- and life-safety standards, and in 75 percent of court facilities, adequate access for persons with disabilities cannot be provided. Most courts do not offer safe children's waiting areas.

“I am hopeful that when the public’s need for additional judicial positions and safe and secure courthouses is assessed, political and institutional differences will be put aside and the three branches of government will agree on the importance of removing these existing obstacles to adequate, accessible, and secure justice,” Chief Justice George stated.

## **OTHER INITIATIVES**

In addition to new judgeships and courthouses, the Chief Justice reported on other important initiatives, including the following:

**Legal Services:** The Chief Justice has supported efforts to increase funding for legal services for low-income Californians, to expand self-help services for persons unable to afford counsel, and to provide language interpreter services in various civil proceedings.

**Conservatorships:** The Chief Justice has appointed a new Probate Conservatorship Task Force to study the handling of probate conservatorships in the courts and to develop recommendations for possible changes in statutory law, court rules and practices, funding, education, and training.

**Foster Care:** The Chief Justice will soon name another task force to study the foster care system and to make recommendations for necessary changes.

**Article VI:** The judicial branch is proposing changes to the judicial article (article VI) of the state Constitution, which would place current budget safeguards and other measures into the Constitution to ensure judicial independence.

*The complete text of the Chief Justice’s State of the Judiciary Address is available on the California Courts Web site at [http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/reference/1\\_2speeches.htm](http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/reference/1_2speeches.htm).*

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